

# Recruiting and Retaining Parent Members on Interagency Teams

## The Comprehensive Services Act

Under the Comprehensive Services Act (CSA), parent representatives serve as members of interagency Family Assessment and Planning Teams (FAPT) and Community Policy and Management Teams (CPMT). These parents provide the added value of bringing new ideas, from the perspective of parents, to the planning process.

When the CSA became law in 1993, Virginia was the first state to mandate parent representatives on teams as part of the interagency planning process. Parents were added to strengthen the efforts of the teams. This decision was based on research that showed that families have a higher rate of success for their children when parents are involved in the planning and delivery of services.

The unique perspective of parents can be a strong link to the success of communities in creating systems of care for children and adolescents with serious emotional and behavioral problems. Parents are valuable as supporters of other parents, and as integral members of policy and decision-making teams. Participating parents can be extremely helpful when they have had a child who received services through this process.

## WAYS TO INVOLVE PARENTS

"In effective systems of care, families are partners at policy making, management, and service levels of the system with other key stakeholders. They actively support and engage families in a number of ways, for example:

- Providing tangible supports such as transportation, translation, and childcare assistance
- Recognizing and drawing on the knowledge and skills that parents bring to the table (e.g. utilizing parents as trainers of other stakeholders)
- Providing capacity-building support that gives families the information, skills, and confidence to partner such as:
  - Training
  - Peer and non-peer mentoring
  - Asking how families would like to be involved."

From: "The System Building Process," Sheila Pires, Georgetown University, 2002.

## **Family Members as Members of the Team**

When parent members are a part of the interagency team, it is important that they have a strong understanding of the CSA and the interagency process. This allows team members the opportunity to understand the process and gives them a sense of history and pride in being part of this important planning effort for families. The more they feel that they have equal information with other team members, the better they will be able to serve as active and vital participants. One place to begin is encouraging parents to review the Comprehensive Services Act Web site - <http://www.csa.state.va.us/>.

## **Recruiting Parents as Team Members**

The first step in this partnership is to identify potential parent team members. Whenever possible, seek parents whose children have received services and supports through the FAPT. When you work with families, observe those who are strong advocates for their own child - and those who show leadership qualities and creativity. Nurture relationships with parents who show compassion and interest for other children and families. Once they are beyond their own crisis, they may be the strongest advocates for the CSA in your region.

## **Some Places to Look for Parent Representatives**

- Get on the agenda of PTA meetings and make a brief presentation outlining the need for parent involvement
- Ask PTA leaders for suggestions of dependable, active parents who might be willing to serve
- Invite parents who are involved on local special education advisory committees or other local boards
- Make presentations/appeals to graduate schools of education, psychology, social work, or rehabilitative services - many adult students are family members of children with special needs
- Communicate with local colleges and universities - often they are able to assist in identifying potential staff members who are also family members of children with special needs

Take your time in the interviewing and selection process for parent members. One child advocate cautions that sometimes parents are not able to separate their own problems from the case they are reviewing. It is important to be sure that the team members are reliable, able to maintain confidentiality, and prepared for the leadership role team membership requires.

Doing outreach to potential parent team members is worth the time and energy it takes - the pay-off can be team members who are reliable, engaged in the process, and proud of their involvement on the team.

# When You Have Identified a Potential Parent Member

Plan an orientation meeting where you can review expectations. Parents who serve on CMPT or FAPT have different responsibilities. It is important for the parents to fully understand what their role is; that is, whether their role is working on systems or providing information and support for parents who come before the review team.

Give the parents honest, realistic information about the time commitment of team membership. They need to have a schedule that is flexible enough to accommodate long meetings two or three days a month.

Talk with the parents about issues of confidentiality - making sure that they understand that they are bound by the same ethical practice as all other team members. Parents may be very aware of this requirement - especially if they also have had a child in the system.

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***“Thirteen years ago, I set out on a mission to help educate, not only my wife and myself, but as many parents as possible in my area.”***

- Charlie Bowman  
Parent Representative, Patrick County

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Share information with the parents that will assure them that they can excuse themselves from a FAPT meeting if there is a conflict of interest - for example, if the child being served is a neighbor or friend.

As you conduct this mutual interview, ask parents what motivates them to serve. It will help you in planning the training and support that they may need.

Give the parents the opportunity to decline the invitation to serve on a team if they choose to do so.

## Training

After you have conducted the initial interview with parent representatives, make sure that you offer training for them. The training needs to include information on diagnoses that they may need to understand, medication information, a glossary to acronyms, frequently used treatment options, and community resources. Parents also need the

CSA philosophy and information about local policies and procedures. Always include issues of confidentiality, finding support as a team member, and accessing information as training components.

Lunch-time trainings once a month can be a great way to bring FAPT and CPMT parent representatives together for shared learning, to give them the opportunity to meet, and to mentor new recruits. In addition, encourage family support and advocacy organizations to offer relevant training opportunities.

**Retaining Parents as Team Members**

Keeping parents involved on a team is important for continuity of the team as well as to retain the knowledge that the parents gain as an asset to your planning process. Some strategies include the following.

Help parent team members take care of themselves during their time of service. They need to understand the stress involved in hearing difficult family circumstances, and someone on the team should be the designated person that they may go to for their own information and support. While other team members have colleagues to talk with, a parent representative on a team doesn't have anyone to talk with following a difficult meeting. Having a person to talk with, even briefly, following a meeting will make burnout less likely. This person should reach out to the parents periodically, check in, and offer a listening ear. Volunteering can be an isolating experience, and keeping parents connected is important.

Some localities are able to offer childcare stipends or cash stipends to parents. If this is a possibility, explain that to the parents. If not, don't give up - many localities have active parent team members who do not receive financial support.

Find ways to honor the parent representatives. They can be rewarded in ways other than cash. Recognition by presenting them with opportunities to attend a conference or event, a letter from the county board of supervisors, a book, a small gift - and a hearty "thank-you" can go far in keeping parents at the table.

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***“Family representatives on teams are a precious resource for parents in our community.”***

- Provider  
Suffolk, VA

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Help parents recognize when they need to excuse themselves from a meeting - for example, when they are acquainted with the family that is being discussed, unless all parties are comfortable with their involvement.

Stress the need for objectivity - the ability to look with an open mind and attitude at all possibilities for services, not just a “one size fits all” approach. Every family’s need is different - and the array of services should reflect individualized planning.

Involve the parent representatives in any training opportunity that is available. The more they know, the more they can fully participate.

Always plan for transition - the parent on your team may move, take a new job, or burn out. Having more than one parent member trained and ready to participate is essential for continuous service.

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***“Parent representatives on teams create an environment of mutual respect and support that helps the family overcome the challenges of parenting children with emotional disorders.”***

- Patti Cetin  
Taking Action for Special Kids, Tazewell  
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Have an alternate parent on each team whenever possible, and invite that person to participate in training opportunities. Encourage the alternate’s attendance at team meetings.

Parent representatives should be given adequate advance notice of meetings. It is very difficult for many volunteers to change plans at the last minute.

Create opportunities for parent representatives to get to know each other outside of official meetings. Again, training opportunities are a great way to bring people together. This creates a break from the potential isolation that parent representatives can feel.

It is usually best to keep the role of parent representatives clear and straightforward. Try not to complicate their role by asking them to do paperwork or chair meetings.

Thank the parents for their commitment every time they attend a meeting!

## **Ways Parents Can Be Involved in Addition to Serving on Teams**

At the policy level, parents can be part of a team that reviews Request for Proposals (RFPs) and contracts for services. They can serve on advisory bodies and be supportive advocates of improved services. Often, parents are able to do things that you can't do- lobbying for increased funding or shifts in funding streams, for example. As parents become educated and informed, the opportunities for them to impact policy increases.

At the management level, parents can assist with evaluating system performance, serve on hiring committees for provider and governmental agencies, and assist with training activities.

And, at the service delivery level, parents can be hired as peer mentors, system navigators, care managers, family support workers, and advocates.

**For more information please visit  
the Office of Comprehensive Services'  
Web site at  
<http://www.csa.state.va.us/>**